[Medieval Georgia]

THE LIFE OF GEORGIA

Kazakh district of Georgia. No very ancient examples of Caucasian rug-weaving exist, but it is certain that the industry was developed from remote times. But here again, as Georgian architecture is part of East Christian architecture so is the Caucasian weaver's art an integral part of Islamic art —although the Christian weavers of Armenia, using what has come to be an essentially Islamic medium, have acquired no little renown.

Georgian and Armenian illumination, which achieved a certain degree of quality, cannot compare with the gorgeous workmanship of the Persians, and its technique is an adaptation of the Persian manner—including the aged animal style—and East Christian ecclesiastical formalism. The little that remains of Georgian fresco-painting and mosaic-work is crude copying from the Greek masters, but Georgian carving on wood and stone, although in the Byzantine tradition, is good work and has some originality. It is certainly the equal of the Armenian stone-carving which has attained some celebration in Europe.

In two spheres of art did the mediæval Georgians achieve not only quality equal to the best of Byzantium and Persia, but creative originality. In epic poetry, the Georgians far surpassed the Byzantines; and although comparison is difficult and invidious, it may be claimed that the masterpieces of Shota Rusthaveli and Sargis Tmogveli rival, if they do not surpass, the more celebrated works of their Persian contemporaries. And in the metallurgical arts—particularly in their own speciality, the metal icon—the Georgians produced creations which certainly equalled the products of the Islamic and Mediterranean cities of the time.

The churches of Georgia in their general design and structure may be divided into two principal types, which correspond in character to contemporary monuments through the Byzantine world and Armenia. The more ancient was the *centralized* type—the circular or quadrangular chapel, so constructed as to direct the gaze of the devout upward to the arched dome of the cupola, which with its sacred frescoes was to be identified with the vault of heaven. By the sixth century the majority of churches were being built in this style—which Strzygowski derives from the domed tent of the nomad Sacæ and the fashion of which he attributes to the influence of Iranian and Armenian ideas. The old Roman *basilica*, with its broad nave and impression of deep perspective, was passing. Justinian built his church on the Grave of Our Lord in Jerusalem in the new style. It was

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000 followed in the magnificent churches of Syria, at St. Elias of Brusa, at St. George of Salonika and at St. Vitali of Ravenna, at St. Serge and Little Sophia and St. Irene in Byzantium, and it was finally brought to its apogee in St. Sophia.

346 177 ● 531 The *centralized* type owed much to the initiation if not to the invention of the Armenians, and there are many churches built on this design in Armenia. In Georgia the churches of the *centralized* type which survive are few in number; the best examples are the Church of the Holy Cross at Mtzkheta, and the churches of Martvili and Ateni in Mingrelia and Dranda in Abkhazeti. In churches of this type the *cupola* had no *drum*, or the *drum* was only of very stocky dimensions.

Between the tenth and twelfth centuries a more complex structure representing a combination of the *centralized* plan with the older *basilica* had resulted in the development of the *cruciform* conception, in which the intention was to concentrate the gaze of the worshipper round and over the altar. The churches of SS. Andrew and Theotokos in Constantinople, the Catholic and Apostolic Church in Athens and Daphni near Athos, belong to this type. The diameter of the *cupola* was not so great as in the earlier *centralized* style; it had a lesser interlie and for that reason held much more lightly; this latter fact allowed the construction of a taller *drum* which enabled the building to be given a "head". A better proportion was given to the whole *ensemble* and the frontal appearance was greatly improved. In Georgia the majority of churches were built on variations of this latter *cruciform* plan, the most notable examples of which are Kutais Cathedral, and the churches of Mokvi, Bedia, Porta and Pitsunda. The type and plan of these churches belong to the period between the tenth and twelfth centuries, although many of them are of later times, and the reconstruction of some on the ancient model, dates from the seventeenth century. In the churches of the tenth to twelfth centuries, the *ensemble* was more pleasing than in the earlier structures, and the fronts were built higher and were decorated with cornices and carved ornamentations. The whole contrasts in its grace and harmony with the more ancient type, where there is practically no *drum* under the *cupola* or if there is a *drum*, it is of low structure and distinguished by its heaviness and stuntedness.

After the combination of the *centralized* type with the old *basilica* type, the *cupola* was heightened and the *drum*

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346 531 177 assumed a greater importance. Separated masses came into being, the structural joining of which made it possible to evolve from a formless mixture of outbuildings—as in St. Sophia of Constantinople—the form of integral beauty which is exemplified in St. Sophia of Trebizond and at Gelati in Imereti. The high and graceful *cupola* of the Caucasus covered often with a *tent* or *head* (the ancient symbol of sanctity) perfected the whole conception of composite harmony. Bedia in Abkhazeti—built in the first decade of the eleventh century by King Bagrat III, in honour of Our Lady of Blachernæ—with its finely carved walls covered with the ancient interlaced design, must have been, in its unruined state, one of the finest examples of this Georgian interpretation of Byzantine and Armenian architectural principles.

Abkhazeti and Samtzkhé—the Chorokhi country—were always favoured by the Bagratid kings as their ancient patrimony, and it was in those two regions that the most beautiful churches were built during the vigorous days of the rising monarchy, when Kartli still lay open to Mussulman incursions, and Kakheti was an obscure and independent principality. In the heart of Samtzkhé, along the Chorokhi valley and its tributaries, a number of beautiful churches were built; such are the ruins of Tbeti in Shavsheti, Yeni Rabat (Antonisi) and Opisa, of Khulo in Achara and of Zarzma in the valley of the Jaqis-tsqali.

The churches of Samtzkhé were less influenced by Byzantine conceptions than those of Abkhazeti. The spreading vault of Dranda, Mokvi and Pitsunda in Abkhazeti is met with rarely in other parts of Georgia. The church at Mokvi, which like that at Dranda bears indications of a later reconstruction, had, to begin with, a spreading vault, which indicates undoubtedly the Byzantine origin of its plan and mass. Pitsunda, despite the tradition of its foundation by Justinian, belongs to the same period as Mokvi, and, like Mokvi, it bears a strong resemblance to the contemporary churches of St. Sophia in Kiev and Novgorod.

346 531 Other churches—as Bedia in Mingrelia and the Meskhian foundations—although they are in many ways like those of Abkhazeti and are of the same period, have already their own differences both in plan and construction; there are no altar projections and niches appear. The walls are covered with carvings showing local originality, braidings and broad connecting lines of crosses and animal figures, hemming round

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the windows and doors. Intervals between the lines are filled with ornamentation—interlaced and vegetable designs: the top is cut out like a tent; there are no columns, but lines are already abundant. 346 531

Lastly we see the ultimate evolution to which Georgian ecclesiastical architecture attained, where capitals and bases appear and the lines develop into columns of different widths. This type includes the finest of all the ecclesiastical monuments of the Caucasus—Kutais Cathedral—and the Chorokhi churches of Shatberdi (Porta) and Dolisi Khana. The churches from which columnar decoration is absent may be regarded as appertaining to the more local Georgian type, the decorative affinities of which are oriental; those with columnar decoration—although local characteristics are not absent—have definitely the stamp of Byzantine art.

Kutais was the capital of the Bagratids until the first quarter of the twelfth century; under the Mongol hegemony it was a safer seat for the Georgian kings than was Tiflis, and during the Turkish and Persian wars Georgian cultured life was continued here with less interruption than in the eastern country. It is not surprising therefore that the artistic centre of the mediæval Georgian Church is to be found at Kutais and Gelati, rather than at Tiflis and Mtzkheta.

Bagrat III began the construction of Kutais Cathedral as a shrine in honour of his mother, the noble Queen Gurandukhti, in 1003; it was completed by his grandson Bagrat IV, whose first wife, Elena, a niece of the Emperor Romanos Argyros, had brought in her train a number of Byzantine artists and craftsmen. The Cathedral was finally wrecked by the Turks in 1691. The plan of Kutais Cathedral represents a rather late development of the *cruciform* plan, and on the same design several of the finest Georgian monuments which survive have been built—Gelati, Tortomi in Samtzkhé, and the restored Cathedral of Mtzkheta built by King Alexander after the devastations of Timur. It is in its carved stone decorations that the Cathedral of Kutais is most notable and the wealth of carving distinguishes it, with Tortomi and Tbeti, from other contemporary monuments.

The façade of Kutais varies in its decorations; the western side is poorest, probably because it was little seen from the road. The eastern front is richest and it is likely that on this side the Cathedral was most open to the view of believers. Rich cylinders on three ramparts with bases and capitals, indicate the trunks of columns, and in form correspond

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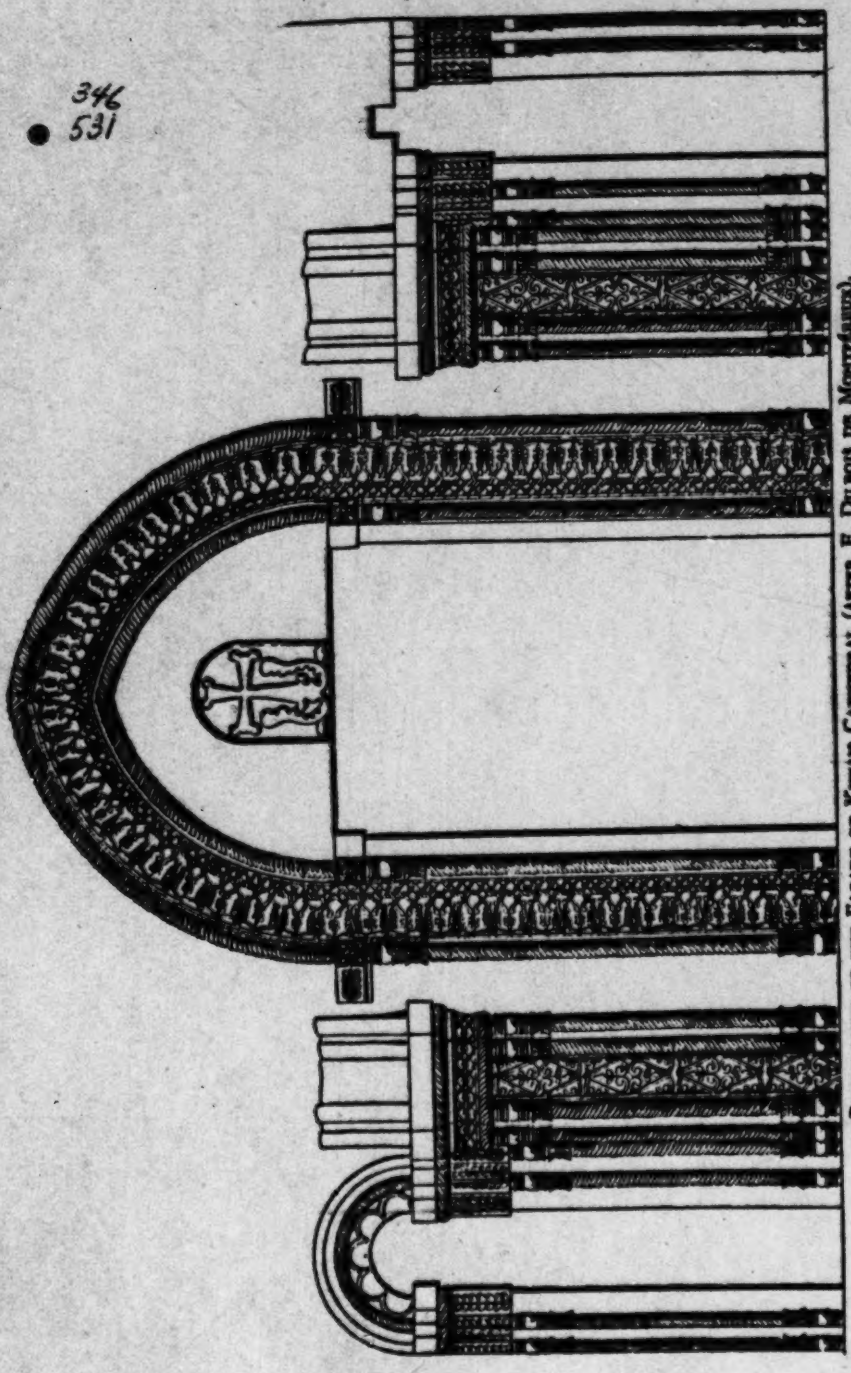

Restoration of the Façade of Kutaïs Cathedral (after F. Du bois de Montpéreux).

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346 closely to the decoration of Tbeti and Gelati. This columnar
●531 decoration is, of course, essentially Byzantine, but the Cathedral has, nevertheless, its distinct Georgian identity and its characteristic Georgian details, as, for instance, the altar-niche and the interlaced ornamentations.

The great days of Georgian church-building came to an end in the thirteenth century. After the period of the Mongol and Timurid wars, the architectural history of the country is chiefly notable for the ambitious reconstructions of Mtzkheta and Sioni by the Kartlian kings. The ancient churches of Abkhazeti fell into ruins and stand half-buried in the forest, and Mongols and Osmanli wrecked the shrines of Samtzkhé. Only here and there where a rich feudatory had achieved independence and a temporary prosperity did a new foundation rise beside the humbler church of the domain. Thus in the middle of the fifteenth century the Atabegi Manuchar raised the fine Church of Safar over against Akhaltzikhé, seven thousand feet above the sea. An Armenian architect seems to have built for him, and his craftsmen achieved some exquisite stone-carving and some of the best surviving mural frescoes of the Caucasus. About the middle of the sixteenth century the kings of Kakheti embellished and reconstructed Alaverdi as the Metropolitan See of their precarious kingdom; and the Eristavni of the Aragvi raised the large brick pile of Ananuri—with its elaborate and grotesque carvings of trees, and serpents biting their tails, chained lions and hares. But the kings of Georgia were in extremity and the fount of East Christian art—Byzantium—was choked for ever. No trickle of the influence of Renaissance architecture came through into the closed Pontine lands, and the Baroque, spreading with the commercing of the French and the Italians, penetrated into Anatolia only far enough to be remembered in the bastard mosque of Yuzgad.

341 Separated from the Georgian districts of Lechkhumi and
531 Radsha by passes which are only accessible to the traveller
177 from the last half of June to the end of August, Svaneti, in language, in customs and in art, has always been distinguished from the more open parts of Georgia. The tall and slender stone towers, resembling in character the round towers of Ireland, are an individual feature of Svanian architecture and their origin has never been satisfactorily explained. These towers indeed, together with the ancient interlaced design, and in combination with certain physical, psychological and linguistic affinities, have suggested an intangible and mys-

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terious connection between the Iber-ni of the Black Sea and the Hibemi of the Atlantic island—a remote connection which will probably never be scientifically explained, but which nevertheless exists. The geographical isolation of Svaneti preserved always a conservatism in both linguistic and cultural processes, and here remnants of things most anciently Georgian survive. The ecclesiastical architecture of Svaneti affords an example of this cultural conservatism.

In Svaneti, the *basilica* form of church survived and was developed centuries after the *centralized* and *cruciform* types had become common in Georgia and throughout the East Christian world. The poverty of Svaneti may serve to explain the *basilica* type. The low arched vault employed in the construction of the *basilica* is more simple and easy to build than the *cupola* with its *drum*. Countess Uvarov argues against this explanation on the ground that the frescoes covering the interiors of the Svanian churches and the wealth of icons and sacerdotal plate found therein, the carved doors and iconostases and wrought gates, contradict the assumption of poverty in Svaneti during the great days of the Bagratid Kingdom. But the fact that the frescoes are of later date than the buildings themselves and that they were mostly painted during the days of the Imerian King Giorgi II (1548–85) and his Queen, Tamara Diasamidze, and of their son Alexander, and of King Bagrat IV and his Queen Tamara (1662–80), indicates that Svaneti was specially favoured by royalty during the harryings of Imereti by the Turks, while it is an established fact that much of the wealth in the churches was carried there during troubled times to save it from the sack of the richer churches and monasteries in the south.

The explanation of the striking difference between Georgian and Svanian architecture seems to lie in the poverty and natural conservatism of Svaneti and in the fact that while the *basilicas* of Georgia were destroyed during the Arab wars and later replaced by the newer *centralized* and *cruciform* types, the ancient *basilicas* of Svaneti remained untouched, while the shrines might be repaired but seldom rebuilt.

Again, it is possible that the *basilica* form in Svaneti developed from those pagan sanctuaries *Khati*, *Nishi*, *Mairemi*, in which the inhabitants of the mountains first began to learn to sing praises to the Christian God. The Church of Nuzala in Osseti and a multitude of small chapels scattered all along

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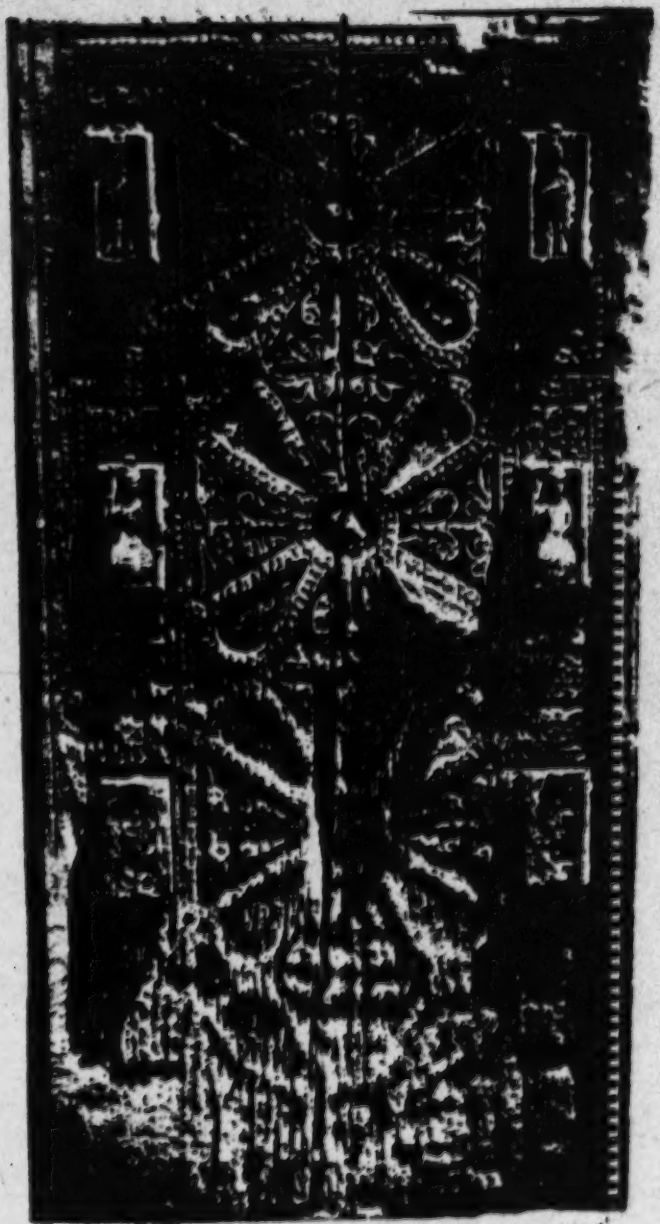

Medieval Art: Carved wooden door from the Village of Dzhakandari

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. XI)

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development of whose process was always limited by their tendency to adhere to representational designs.

By the fourteenth century the Georgian icon had already begun to deteriorate, and by the end of the sixteenth century it has lost all artistic value. The influence of Capuchin monks had introduced a certain element of the Italianate, and the icons of this period, as for instance the Virgin of Kavtis-Khevi, were becoming thoroughly bastardized.

The church plate of the time of the mediæval Georgian Kingdom illustrates further both the skill of Georgian craftsmen and the wealth of the Georgian nobles. Byzantine influence was strong, and the finest example of all which survives, the enamelled gold cross in the Svanian church of Matskhvarishi, is attributed by Countess Uvarov to Byzantine workmanship of the twelfth century. Georgian workmanship in reliquaries, cups, plate and crosses was, however, exceedingly fine, and in many pieces, as in the large gold and enamel *bazarpeshni* or drinking spoons (a purely Georgian fashion), the Georgian craftsmen evolved their own interpretation of both Byzantine and Persian decorative motives.

The few of the Georgian bronze church-gates which survive show exquisite workmanship, and like the stone-sculptures and the carved wooden gates which are preserved at Mghvimé Monastery, in the Svanian churches, and in the Tiflis Museum, they are essentially of local inspiration, a Georgian combination of the national decorative designs—such as the interlaced—with Persian and Byzantine elements introduced.

Byzantium, before all, was a civilization; secondly, a political Empire. And until the fifteenth century the civilization of the Near Eastern lands was in essentials Byzantine. East Christian art was the expression of the Byzantine mind—a stone the facets of which reflected different lights according to whether the eyes cast upon it were Bulgarian or Armenian, Rumanian or Georgian, Serbian or Russian.

The Byzantines were the creators of painting as a living art, and their pupils were Italy in great degree, the Russian Masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the provincial schools of Greece and Serbia, Bulgaria and Rumania (which though limited in many ways were not without merit), and the Armenians and Georgians. The Balkan schools, in the last decade, have come in for their meed of appreciation from European students, and the material for Greek and Balkan iconography is plentiful. But the Armenian and